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AUTHOR Cegala, Donald J.
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to present a general research model for the study of interpersonal communication competence. The paper summarizes the research background for the model and covers considerations for a general theory of competence. It notes that recently the communication field has shifted in emphasis from concerns of public speaking competence to research and theory about competence in small groups, organizational settings, the family, and interpersonal settings. It explains that there is a lack of consensus about a general theory of competence, and therefore, little to guide researchers in selecting and evaluating dimensions of communicative competence. The paper finds that the literature consists of numerous proposed dimensions, but that few of these have undergone rigorous assessment and evaluation. In noting considerations for a general theory, it advocates combining knowledge of how to behave with actual performance in order to distinguish competence, and argues that competence also implies standards of appropriateness and effectiveness. The paper then describes a study that used the model to collect data on interaction involvement, concluding that the model reveals the utility of pursuing such studies. (CRH)

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A RESEARCH MODEL FOR THE STUDY OF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE

by

Donald J. Cegala
Dept. of Communication
The Ohio State University
Columbus, Ohio 43210
(614) 422-3400

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A RESEARCH MODEL FOR THE STUDY OF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE

The purpose of this paper is to present a general research model for the study of interpersonal communication competence. Certain parts of the model are not entirely new. It is grounded in a tradition borrowed from educational psychology which emphasizes the cognitive, affective and behavioral domains (e.g., Bloom, Engelhart, Furst, Hill & Krathwohl, 1956; Krathwohl, Bloom & Masia, 1964; also see Kibler, Cegala, Watson, Barker & Miles, 1981). The model also may be considered as an extension of an approach to research that is suggested in the use of multiple-act criteria (e.g., Daly, 1978) and other research traditions that attempt to define personality traits in terms of cognitive, behavioral and psychophysiological responses (e.g., Eysenck, 1967; Barratt & Patton, 1983). In this regard, the research model presented here may be especially useful for investigating traits of interpersonal communication competence. However, it also may be applied usefully to other research interests within the current literature in competence.

Background for the Model

As McCroskey (1982) has correctly observed, the communication field has always been concerned with competence of some sort. Our historical legacy in the works of Aristotle and other ancients clearly indicates a primary concern with competent rhetorical communication. More recently, the field has seen a shift in emphasis from concerns of public speaking competence to research and theory about competence in small groups, organizational settings, the family and, in general, interpersonal settings.

Nevertheless, scholars' interest in interpersonal communication competence is relatively new, though the literature in this area is

growing at a fast rate. Only about six years ago the literature in interpersonal communication competence (excluding textbooks) pretty much consisted of isolated articles in communication, social and developmental psychology and, to a lesser extent, linguistics. Much of this work was summarized and presented a few years ago in a series of independent convention papers by communication scholars (e.g., Backlund, 1977; Parks, 1977; Wiemann, 1977a). The emphasis of this earlier work on communication competence was on identifying, describing and measuring various dimensions[1] of competence. Although a number of potentially useful dimensions of communication competence were produced by this research tradition, there are some viable questions about its current approach.

For one thing, the potential list of dimensions relevant to competence is reminiscent of the early learning psychologists' attempt to identify motivations and drives. The reviews of the early work on competence dimensions (e.g., Backlund, 1977; Parks, 1977; Wiemann, 1977a, 1977b) read a bit like a smorgasbord of concepts and definitions. One marvels at the numerous ways in which communication competence has been conceptualized, carved up, and labeled. One also wonders about the endless array of factors that might be proposed as dimensions of competence.

More recently, Wiemann and Backlund's (1980) review of the competence literature suggests that while ambiguity of definition still exists, there is also reasonable consensus on a few key dimensions of competence. In particular, they suggest that empathy, behavioral flexibility and interaction management are dimensions of competence that appear in several scholars' work, though often under different names. While Wiemann and Backlund's synthesis of competence dimensions is useful in reducing some of the ambiguity in the literature, there is perhaps a more fundamental problem with the current

approach to dimensions of competence than merely their potential number.

Even if it is possible to synthesize currently proposed dimensions of competence to a few key ones (i.e., by standards of agreement), there is still no clear means for assessing the utility of the resulting dimensions on other grounds. In other words, there does not appear to be a clearly articulated set of standards for evaluating the theoretical significance of proposed dimensions of communicative competence. Given the lack of consensus about a general theory of competence, there is little to guide researchers in selecting and evaluating dimensions of competent communication. Accordingly, the literature consists of numerous proposed dimensions, some of which relate some of which are redundant, and others that appear unique. However, few (if any) of these dimensions have undergone rigorous assessment and evaluation in terms of their potential for advancing theory development in communication competence. For example, given Wiemann and Backlund's (1980) dimensions of empathy, behavioral flexibility and interaction management, we are still left with some troublesome questions: What are these components? What does one know when one is empathic, behaviorally flexible or managing an interaction? How does one manifest this knowledge? How are these components related? The point is that synthesis alone will not provide the means for creating standards to assess the theoretical significance of dimensions of competence, even though it is helpful in organizing the literature.

In contrast to earlier work which sought the identification of various dimensions of competence, recent investigations have focused on a more general theory of communication competence. It is believed that the needed standards for assessing proposed dimensions of competence are implied in these discussions.

Considerations for a General Theory of Competence

Wiemann and Backlund (1980) indicated at the time of their review that there was no consensus on a definition, or general theory, of communicative competence. The same state pretty much exists today, three years after their review. However, a recent article by McCroskey (1982) appears to have had the fortunate result of generating considerable dialogue among communication scholars about basic issues of competence. Among the more enlightening responses to McCroskey's position is Spitzberg's (1983) proposal for a view of competence as knowledge, skill and impression. As will be seen shortly, Spitzberg's view of communicative competence is quite compatible with the research model presented here.

McCroskey's (1982) call for a distinction between communicative competence and performance apparently has not received overwhelming support. While I initially agreed with McCroskey's wish to separate the terms "competence" and "performance" (Cegala, 1982), I now believe that communicative competence is best viewed as a form of knowledge and performance. The arguments for such a position have been well articulated by Spitzberg (1983) and will not be elaborated here. Suffice it to say that it is assumed in this essay that interpersonal communication competence entails knowledge of how to behave as well as actual performance.

Consistent with Spitzberg's (1983) views, as well as a previously stated personal position (Cegala, 1982), it is also assumed that communication competence implies standards of appropriateness and effectiveness. However, this essay will not address per se the ambiguities and difficulties of developing criteria for assessing communication behavior in terms of appropriateness and effectiveness. Spitzberg's concept of relational competence may prove quite useful in tackling operational aspects of these terms.

Empirical work on this issue is perhaps one of the most important tasks facing researchers. It is believed that the model presented in this paper may help to focus future work on this important task.

Although McCroskey's (1982) specific position on separating competence and performance may not be endorsed by everyone, there is wide agreement on the general notion that interpersonal communication competence is multi-faceted and best viewed as consisting of component parts. Even the earlier research attempting to isolate dimensions of competence clearly assumed this perspective. However, current concerns about a general theory of competence (e.g., McCroskey, 1982; Spitzberg, 1983) have articulated more global categories to encompass the multi-faceted nature of communication competence than the discrete dimensions produced by earlier research. In particular, there appears to be agreement even between McCroskey and Spitzberg (and several others) on the notion that communication competence entails cognitive, affective and behavioral components. The differences among scholars' views seem to be more concerned with what labels one applies to these various components (e.g., whether the term "competence" applies to all three domains or to only cognitive or cognitive and affective domains), rather than issues concerning their relevance to competence. It is believed that the criteria for assessing proposed dimensions of interpersonal communication competence are found in the tri-part cognitive, affective and behavioral component view. To articulate the specifics of this position it is first necessary to consider yet another issue in the competence literature.

There appears to be reasonable agreement among scholars on the notion that communicative competence is essentially contextual, or situation specific (e.g., Wiemann, 1977b; Wiemann & Backlund, 1980; McCroskey, 1982; Spitzberg, 1983). In other words, competence is best assessed in terms of

individuals interacting within a given situation. Accordingly, what might be competent (i.e., appropriately effective) in one situation may not be so in others, or a person may be competent in one situation but less so in another. This contextual view appears to be most reasonable for making judgments of individuals' competence. However, as will be noted shortly, it must also be reconciled with a desire to generalize what is learned about competent communication.

Given a contextual view of competence, Spitzberg (1983) argues that the only reasonable way[2] to assess competence is by "obtaining relational participants' views of their own and alter's communicative appropriateness and effectiveness in that episode" (p. 326). What is suggested here is that these relational views should include reports and observations of participants' cognitive, affective and behavioral domains. Perhaps this is what Spitzberg has in mind by saying that communication competence is knowledge, skill and impression. However, even if this is so the idea must be taken further. In particular, what is important to theory development in competence is understanding how relational participants think, feel and act during a communication episode. This entails a data set that allows for the examination of how these components relate and form a wholistic experience of communication for participants.

What is being suggested is that researchers in communicative competence adopt a procedure whereby data sets of participants' cognitive, affective and behavioral responses are obtained and that these domains be examined for both their independent and related contributions to participants' experience of interpersonal communication. A fundamental advantage of this approach is that it provides a means for studying what appear to be the key components of competent communication. More practically, the approach encourages

researchers to specify relationships within and among the behavior domains. To the extent that concepts can explain and predict meaningful variance among these components, they obtain an empirically based breadth that becomes useful in theory building. At the same time, there are implied in the model criteria that may be used to judge the utility and scope of concepts thought relevant to interpersonal communication competence.

For example, perhaps the label "dimension" might be reserved for concepts and associated operational definitions that show strong empirical ties to all three behavior domains. Moreover, there is the additional implication that such an approach to competence research may provide a framework for generalizing what is learned contextually about competent communication. This is perhaps best illustrated by how the proposed model might influence research into various traits of interpersonal communication competence.

The clearest, or at least most researched, example of what I am calling a trait of interpersonal communication competence is communication apprehension (e.g., McCroskey, 1976; McCroskey, 1977). My own research into interaction involvement (e.g., Cegala, 1981; Cegala, Savage, Brunner & Conrad, 1982) serves as another example. The major objective of research into communication traits is the identification and measurement of stable individual difference variables that contribute to peoples' experience of communication. It seems that traits which can be linked theoretically and empirically to responses in the cognitive, affective and behavioral domains may prove valuable in understanding how individual differences relate to the communication process.

For example, last autumn I conducted a study on interaction involvement. Participants were first engaged in a six minute, unstructured conversation with a stranger (dyads consisted of two highs, two lows, or one high and

one low involved person). Afterwards they completed several self-report measures relevant to the interaction. One was a 60-item mood scale (Zevon & Tellegen, 1982), another was an open-ended questionnaire asking the subjects to recall (1) what he/she discussed during the conversation, (2) what the dyad partner discussed, and (3) a description of the partner's physical characteristics. The intent of this procedure was to gather data relevant to how subjects' felt (i.e., mood state) and how well they processed information during the interaction. Similar data were gathered again later on in the study, but the second time subjects were engaged in a 15 minute negotiation session. The rationale for the study provided hypotheses about how high and low involved subjects should think and feel during the two communication sessions. Based on canonical correlation analysis, the results provided an indication that high and low involved subjects differed significantly in their affective and cognitive responses during both communication sessions (Cegala, 1983). Work is now underway preparing a third data set on these subjects. One data set consists of a linguistic analysis of subjects' cohesive harmony index and other indices about how well subjects shared information about topics of talk. The other data set consists of a replication of earlier work on interaction involvement and nonverbal behavior (Cegala, et al., 1982), as well as an extension of that work to concerns about interactional synchrony. Ultimately, the goal of this project is to describe the cognitive, affective and behavioral manifestations of interaction involvement and relate the same to judgments of communication competence (based on participants' and observers' judgments). It is believed that, if nothing else, this research strategy should reveal the utility of pursuing the study of interaction involvement. In this manner the research model implicitly

serves as part of the criteria for judging involvement's role in communication competence.

As indicated at the outset of this essay, the proposed research model is not entirely new as far as its major components are concerned. What does appear unique about the model is the call for data sets on individuals' cognitive, affective and behavioral domains which are then examined simultaneously for independent and related sources of variance. However, it would be naive to believe that such a model serves more than as a general orientation to research into communication competence. Researchers still must make careful and theoretically guided selections of concepts that reflect the tri-part components. This is by no means an easy task. In addition, there are logistical problems in gathering large and diverse data sets on the same subjects, as well as potential problems of analysis. In the long run though, the effort needed to solve these and other problems may have considerable payoff in providing depth and scope to the variables we consider in our research into communication competence.

NOTES

1. I will later argue that the term "dimension" should be used in a particular way.

2. While Spitzberg's (1983) position is well taken, it is the author's opinion that we should not completely exclude outside observer's judgments of competence from our research.

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